THE REFERENDUM LIGHTHOUSE: HOW STATE-LEVEL INITIATIVES DRIVE VOTER TURNOUT

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This thesis examines the use of ballot initiatives at the state level to determine whether the presence of certain types of ballot initiatives cause an increase in voter turnout at the state level. This study is unique in that rather than focusing on individual level voting behavior to explain why an individual may or may not be more likely to vote with the inclusion of ballot initiatives, I focus on aggregate level data to answer the following questions: do certain types of ballot initiatives have an effect on voter turnout? If so, how large is the effect? Collecting data from all ballot initiatives that appeared in the United States from 1998-2014, my research disputes the conventional wisdom that ballot initiatives have any effect on voter turnout during a presidential election. However, my research shows a four percent increase in turnout when any initiative appears on the ballot and a nearly five percent increase in voter turnout when an initiative concerning same-sex marriage appeared on the ballot during a non-presidential year election.

Aaron Dusso, Ph.D., Chair

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Introduction

Proposed state constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage increased the turnout of socially conservative voters in many of the 11 states where the measures appeared on the ballot on Tuesday, political analysts say, providing crucial assistance to Republican candidates including President Bush in Ohio and Senator Jim Bunning in Kentucky.

James Dao, New York Times, 2004

Following the reelection of George W. Bush in 2004, several media pundits and political strategists were quick to point out the appearance of ballot initiatives banning same-sex marriage in eleven states as the turning point in the election – particularly in the critical swing state of Ohio. New York Times Columnist James Dao (Smith 2006) claimed the initiatives were critical in pulling socially conservative voters who might not have voted to the polls in support of George W. Bush. The chairman of the Republican Party in Ohio was more circumspect, but was not dismissive of the potential effects on the outcome of the race either, conceding, "I would be naïve if I didn't say it helped, especially in the southern part of the state," (Smith 2006). At the very least, the inclusion of these anti-same-sex marriage initiatives allowed George W. Bush to set the agenda, and tone of the 2004 debates by actively campaigning in support of the bans. Bush was able to paint his campaign as offering a clear alternative to the perceived onslaught against conservative core values and reassure voters he would be a president that would fight to keep America's traditional social norms in place. The election of 2004 seemed to be a watershed moment in the discussion of same-sex marriage in the national discourse that began back in 1998, with Hawaii's decision to recognize same-sex unions. Following that decision by the Hawaiian Supreme Court, conservatives pushed back hard against same-sex marriage and began

trying to include banning same-sex unions on state ballots with increased fervor. The 2004 election was pivotal in that the success of getting this issue on the ballot in so many states seemingly drummed up voting interest in the Republican base and handed George W. Bush the election. Even as the country was becoming further entrenched in an increasingly unpopular war overseas largely seen as President Bush's decision, he was still able to win the election, and both sides of the aisle were pointing to the issue of same-sex marriage as the issue that pushed Bush over the top.

This thesis examines the claims made by political pundits that ballot initiatives, especially those dealing with highly salient issues – particularly same-sex marriage - can increase voter turnout. As pundits believe, the issue of same-sex marriage drew conservatives to the polls and gave the Republicans an electoral advantage. This thesis seeks to study those claims. Rather than focusing on individual level voting behavior in direct democracy elections like past research, e.g. (Lupia 1994; Lewkowicz 2006; Tolbert and Smith 2007; Cebula 2008; Abranjano 2010; Bigger 2011; Childers and Binder 2012), this thesis focuses on an area that given substantially less attention: state level voting behavior at the aggregate level. My research seeks to fill in gaps in the existing research on the topic of ballot initiatives. Some research that has focused on voting in ballot initiatives/referenda elections at the state level has concentrated on the overall effectiveness of direct democracy's ability to increase turnout, not on whether or not certain issues were more likely to increase voter participation than others (Everson 1981; M. Smith 2001b). Others that do focus on moral issues have a much more narrow scope of focus, concentrating on the Ohio election in 2004 Donovan, Tolbert, and Parry (2005) or using a smaller pool of data that focuses or a limited

number of years (Grummel 2008; Cebula 2008; Biggers 2011; Childers and Binder 2012). Still other research has focused on how the initiative affects public policy; questioning whether or not policy is more responsive to citizens in states with direct democracy than those without it (Tolbert and Smith 2007). This thesis offers a clear alternative to past research by focusing solely on aggregate state-level voter turnout with a larger data set that includes the most recent election. It is my contention that ballot initiatives do indeed drive up voter turnout, but only those concerning highly salient issues and only during non-presidential election years.

This thesis will proceed as follows: First, I will examine previous research on ballot initiatives and cover the early debates about voter turnout and issue salience. Second, I will introduce my statistical model for studying the link between voter turnout and issue salience at the state level. Third, I will present my findings and an interpretation of the data being presented. Fourth, I will discuss the importance of my findings and offer suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1

Previous Research

Until recently, most scholarly work related to ballot initiatives, and the less commonly used popular referenda, has examined how direct democracy has influenced the direction of public policy, not participation in the electoral process (Cain and Miller 2001). This line of research is primarily concerned with whether policy passed in states with direct democracy is more representative of the population's preferences. If so, does direct democracy undermine one of the basic tenets of democracy by undermining the rights of the minority in favor of the majority?

Whether citizens understand the content of ballot initiatives is an open question and has proven difficult for scholars to measure. After all, not all ballot measures are binary choices (yes or no) and can sometimes contain entire paragraphs of esoteric language or legalese. Some scholars believe some of these more complicated ballot measures can open the door to manipulation of the electorate by deceitful backers of the measure in question who hope to circumvent the democratic process for personal gain (Magleby 1984). The political establishment's mistrust of the electorate's ability to understand fully the policy implications of their choices could be the reason direct democracy saw such limited use around the United States from its inception all the way through the 1970's.

With regard to voter turnout, previous scholarly work has largely agreed that the use of direct democracy ballot initiatives do indeed increase participation (Everson 1981; Goebel 2002; Tolbert and Smith 2007; Cebula 2008; Biggers 2011; Childers and

Binder 2012). However, existing literature on the effects of direct democracy ballot initiatives on voter turnout makes the distinction between ballot initiatives during a presidential election, and initiatives during a mid-term, or off year election. Scholarly work has posited that the mechanisms in place thought to make voters more likely to turn out in a direct democracy election - i.e., lower information cost, greater internal efficacy, and partisan mobilization – are already in place during a presidential election. This makes it more difficult to isolate direct democracy as the key component in causing voter turnout to increase (Smith 2001b; Biggers 2011). Previous research has primarily supported this contention, and shown a positive effect between the count of ballot initiatives and an increase in both presidential and mid-term election turnouts (Donovan, et al. 2005; Tolbert and Smith 2007). Some scholars reject the notion that we have a clear understanding of how a ballot initiative increases voter turnout, and a simple correlation between a large number of initiatives on a ballot and an increase in voter turnout is not clear (Biggers 2011). Direct democracy itself does not increase the level of voter turnout and interest in a campaign, but the type of issues being considered are the driving factor in voter interest.

Campaign Spending

Early advocates of direct democracy in the United States thought its use would serve as a protection against the effects of campaign money and ensure the power to govern would rest with the citizenry as a whole, rather than just a select number of elites (D. Smith 2001a). However, the staggering amount of money involved in the campaign on both sides showed that direct democracy would not offset the influence of

campaign spending, but simply reroute it to other areas and possibly allow the money to be spent more efficiently. Indeed, political campaigns appear more adept at getting initiatives on the ballot and then making the issue one of the centerpieces of their campaign (Smith 2006). This makes the money spent on the campaign easier to focus, as a political party can put an issue on the ballot, and then establish a clear link between the initiative and their particular candidate or party. This political tactic, known as 'candidate priming,' or 'issue priming,' is a favored tactic of party elites, who are becoming increasingly proficient at using it to support their candidate or party (Donovan, Tolbert, and Parry 2005; Lewkowicz 2006). The way the priming effect works is straightforward: party elites put a highly salient issue on the ballot that is likely to stir up emotions among the electorate - same-sex marriage, abortion, tax burdens, etc. A candidate then actively campaigns on the issue and establishes a clear link between themselves and one side of the issue, and the electorate is drawn to the poll to vote for not only the issue in question, but also the candidate that shared their position on it (Donovan, Tolbert and Parry 2005). This not only primes vote choice before the election, it allows the party supporting the ballot measure to actively set the agenda during the campaign, forcing the opposing candidate to campaign from the defensive position.

So how does all this influx of campaign spending influence the outcome of a ballot initiative? According to research, spending against a ballot measure is effective, while spending in favor of its passage is not; moreover, it appears that the side supporting the status quo has a distinct advantage over the side favoring change (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). Stratmann (2004) points out that campaign spending – be it

candidate spending or spending on ballot initiatives – is largely driven by the possibility of success. Confidence in the passage of an initiative may lead a group to spend very little as their confidence grows, while the group feeling less confident about their chances of passage may feel inclined to increase spending to overcome their likely defeat. It may also be the case that that the voters considering the measures are hesitant to enact sweeping policy changes, especially when they do not feel confident in their ability to understand the changes being discussed.

Moral Ballot Issues

A new line of research on direct democracy has sought to answer the question of whether or not certain types of issues on a ballot matter more than others. Does a ballot initiative concerning real estate taxes draw the same level of interest as abortion, same-sex marriage, or any of other hot-button social issue? Researchers such as Smith (2001b) began this line of research by breaking down popular referenda and ballot initiatives by salience according to the amount of news coverage each issue received prior to the election. Concluding that increase in newspaper coverage should coincide with increases in interest from the electorate, Smith was able to show an increase in voter turnout for mid-term elections when a salient initiative or referenda appear on the ballot. Smith's seminal research provides us with a great starting point for study into morality-based ballot initiatives, but also has its limitations. Smith's data set is limited to the timeframe of 1972-1996, well before same-sex marriage initiatives began appearing with frequency on ballots across the country. Smith also does not break the issues down into specific classes; he only acknowledges their salience based on news

coverage. There is no distinction between the initiatives focused on morality (i.e., same-sex marriage, abortion, etc.) and a tax issue that happened to receive substantial press coverage. These limitations make it difficult to pinpoint exactly which issues created increased interest among the electorate. Additionally, Smith uses the traditional measure of voter turnout, Voting Age Population (VAP) rather than the more accurate measure used in this study, Voting Eligible Turnout (VEP).

Grummel (2008) furthers Smith's research by focusing on the issue of what he considers morality based initiatives (i.e., abortion, same-sex marriage, and marijuana legalization) to determine whether it was the increased media coverage that these hot-button topics receive that increase voter turnout, or the issues themselves. These morality-based initiatives are understood easily by the electorate, seem to elicit a strong emotional response within most individuals, and are usually discussed in other mediums in addition to the media. Grummel's research concludes that his three issues of study were most likely to garner increased media attention, which in turn lowered the cost of information and made individuals more likely to vote (Grummel 2008). Grummel's research points us further in the right direction, but leaves out what seem to be a key component to the increase in voter turnout: feelings of internal political efficacy due to the choices being considered by the voter. Burnett and Kogan (2012) conducted a survey study on this topic by focusing on a voter's feelings of political efficacy associated with direct democracy. The authors were able to determine that citizens are more likely to vote when ballot initiatives are present, and less likely to be fooled by the crafting of an initiative's title and summary for political purposes.

Biggers (2011) also examines the effect of ballot initiatives dealing with social issues by examining such issues as abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, stem cell research, drug legalization, same-sex marriage, homosexual rights, and obscenity. Biggers cites previous research dealing with social issues that found 80 percent of respondents in a poll were familiar with the initiatives on a ballot that dealt solely with social issues. Moreover, respondents were more likely to be cognizant of direct democracy initiatives dealing with morality or civil liberties and rights than issues dealing with other subjects (Biggers 2011, but also see Nicholson 2003). Clifford et al. (2015) review previous research on morality-based initiatives and ask what role the rhetoric of political elites plays in linking a voter's moral foundations to his or her attitudes. Focusing purely on stem-cell research, the authors find that rhetoric from political elites was persuasive to individuals on the moral issue of stem-cell research, influencing their political behavior accordingly (Clifford et al. 2015). Based on previous research, morality-based ballot initiatives garner more attention among the electorate, are more easily understood than other initiatives, and more likely to elicit a strong feeling of internal efficacy among the electorate.

Chapter 2

History of the Initiative

Direct democracy, or letting citizens directly vote on one or a set of particular issues, is utilized in two different forms: ballot initiatives and ballot referenda (Everson 1981). Ballot initiatives are drawn up by the citizens themselves, and with enough support, usually through signature drives, are placed on the ballots to be voted on by the electorate (direct initiatives) or sent to the local or state legislature to be voted on (indirect). A referendum, on the other hand, is created and placed on the ballot by a member of the legislature, be it state, local, or federal. Some states allow only indirect or direct initiatives, some allow only popular referenda, and others do not allow direct democracy in any form. For further explanation, I present Figure 1 which displays which states allow direct democracy, and in which form.

Figure 1: State Direct Democracy Breakdown

States That Allow Ballot Initiatives	**Initiative Type**	**Popular Referendum**	**Constitutional Initiative**
Alaska	Indirect	Yes	None
Arizona	Direct	Yes	Direct
Arkansas	Direct	Yes	Direct
California	Direct	Yes	Direct
Colorado	Direct	Yes	Direct
Florida	None	No	Direct
Idaho	Direct	Yes	No

Illinois	None	No	Direct
Maine	Indirect	Yes	None
Maryland	None	Yes	No
Massachusetts	Indirect	Yes	Indirect
Michigan	Indirect	Yes	Direct
Mississippi	None	No	Indirect
Missouri	Direct	Yes	Direct
Montana	Direct	Yes	Direct
Nebraska	Direct	Yes	Direct
Nevada	Direct	Yes	Direct
New Mexico	None	Yes	None
North Dakota	Direct	Yes	Direct
Ohio	Indirect	Yes	Direct
Oklahoma	Direct	Yes	Direct
Oregon	Direct	Yes	Direct
South Dakota	Direct	Yes	Direct
Utah	Direct & Indirect	Yes	Direct
Washington	Direct & Indirect	Yes	None
Wyoming	Indirect	Yes	None

U.S. Virgin Islands	Indirect	Yes	Indirect

Direct Initiative: proposals that qualify go directly on the ballot
Indirect Initiative: proposals are submitted to the legislature, which as the opportunity to act on the proposed legislation.
Popular Referendum: a process by which voters may petition to demand a popular vote on a new law passed by legislature
Source: National Conference of State Legislatures website; http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/chart-of-the-initiative-states.aspx

Ballot initiatives and referenda are not recent features of American democracy; in 1904, the state of Oregon allowed its citizens to participate in a statewide ballot initiative implementing the use of a primary election preceding any election in Oregon (Ernst 2001). Use of the initiative was sporadic at first, as 56 total initiatives were voted on by states across the entire country from 1901-1910. In the following decades, use of the initiative fluctuated and then began to dwindle. By the 1960's the use of the initiative across the entire country had fallen to under 100 for the decade. As the first state to use the initiative, Oregon remains one of the states most committed to its use, and has averaged nearly thirteen ballot initiatives an election from 1998-2014. Use of the initiative remains prolific in the West; California, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona voted on 385 initiatives in the period of this study, 29 percent of all those considered. Understanding why states in the West have become so committed its use can likely be attributed to the idea of policy diffusion. As Mooney (2001) points out, lawmakers and citizens look to other states for ideas on solving their own problems, and are likely to look to their neighboring states first for a variety of reasons. The successes and failures neighboring states have with different policymaking can take some of the guesswork out of policies being adopted. In this sense, California's success in increasing voter turnout and political awareness with its 1978 ballot initiative, Proposition 13, was not lost on its neighbors.

Proposition 13, the People's Initiative to Limit Property Taxation, was a widely popular initiative that called for limits on property taxes for the state's citizens. The brainchild of California businessperson Howard Jarvis, the movement to place tax relief on the ballot was a response to rapid increases in state property taxes that Jarvis and his supporters felt were pricing average citizens out of their homes. Stories of unfair tax assessments designed to clear the poor out of prime real estate locations and corrupt government assessors willing to accept bribes to lower assessment values littered the news. The story of an elderly retired couple on a fixed income of $1900 a year whose property had been assessed at $1800 year became the centerpiece of Jarvis' anti-tax campaign and calls for reform to the system. Opponents claimed that, like the elderly couple facing a seemingly unfair tax assessment, many Californians were in a similar state of peril due to heavy tax burdens. Pro-Initiative campaigns decried corruption in the assessment process and claimed the American dream was being destroyed by greedy unions and politicians trying to squeeze tax revenue from California citizens (Baratz and Moskowitz 1978). Ground support for tax relief swelled, and Jarvis introduced an amendment to California's constitution in the 1978 election that would cap property taxes at one percent of assessed value and limit increases in value for property to no more than two percent, regardless of increases in the property's value. The amendment banned the state of California from imposing any new property taxes and required a two-thirds vote in the state senate to override the measure. The hotly contested issue passed nearly two to one, while also increasing voter turnout during the 1978 election. The turnout of eligible voters went from thirty-eight percent in the 1974 election, to forty-six percent in 1978 (Everson 1981). The increase in civic

participation and turnout caused by this initiative soon caused other states to take notice of the power of the initiative (Tolbert and Smith 2007; Underhill 2015). Since then, the use of initiatives has become more popular, as the decade of 1990-2000 saw 389 initiatives on the ballots for citizens to consider across the country. I present Figure 2 below to show how the total number of initiatives in the United States has risen in recent years.

Figure 2: Total Ballot Initiatives By Decade

Decade	Total Number Of Initiatives
1900-1910	56
1911-1920	293
1921-1930	175
1931-1940	268
1941-1950	149
1951-1960	114
1961-1970	87
1971-1980	209
1981-1990	271
1991-2000	389
2001-2010	343
2011-Present	104

In addition to increasing turnout, scholars theorized that increased use of ballot initiatives would also create a politically well-informed and engaged electorate (Smith

2006). This electorate, empowered by their ability to influence directly policy, would become a politically educated and motived voting bloc that could counter the growing influence of campaign money (Goebel 2002; Smith 2006). Campaign spending is sometimes thought to be a growing threat to the viability of democracy, as wealthy elites can throw their monetary might behind certain candidates to give them an unfair advantage and shape the state and national legislatures to their liking. Proponents of direct democracy argued that the power of the initiative empowered the citizenry by allowing them to dictate public policy without the influence of state legislatures controlled by special interest groups and entrenched party bosses (Bowler and Donovan 2004). Allowing citizens to become the policymakers themselves was thought to eliminate the growing influence of the party bosses and the wealthy elites backing them, returning America to the roots of a government "by the people and for the people."

Scholars have argued that the use of initiatives does indeed make a voter feel more empowered (Tolbert and Smith 2007), but it would be naïve to think its use has counter-acted the effect of campaign spending. In fact, campaign spending has steadily increased over the years (D. Smith 2001a; Smith 2006; Tolbert and Smith 2007; Novak 2014). It is also becoming evident that the increased use of initiatives has simply made it easier to focus campaign spending on a particular issue; this is especially true when there is a clear correlation between a ballot initiative and a candidate's position (D. Smith 2001a). In fact, as noted by Smith (2006), the increased use of initiatives has created a new and growing problem when it comes to campaign spending. As Smith puts it:

> *In contrast to all federal and most state and local races for political office, where ceilings have been placed on the amount of money that can be given to a candidate, there are no limits on the size of contributions (or expenditures) in ballot campaigns. As a result, the equivalent of a 'soft money' loophole exists when it comes to ballot measures, making the sky the limit for these contests (153).*

No recent ballot initiative is a better example of campaign spending run amok than California's Proposition 8 during the 2008 election. A response to a judicial ruling in early 2008 allowing same-sex marriage in the state of California, opponents of same-sex marriage began gathering signatures for a proposed amendment to the state's constitution on the 2008 ballot that would define marriage as only between a man and a woman. The measure, The California Marriage Protection Act, would go on to become one of the costliest ballot initiative campaigns in history (Press 2009). Money both for and against the proposal poured in from all over the country, resulting in an advertising campaign that reached $83.2 million (Press 2009). The measure passed but was rescinded quickly by Judge Vaughn Walker, who ruled that the amendment violated both the Due Process and Equal Protection Clauses of the U.S. Constitution. However, Proposition 8 had proven that campaign spending on a salient ballot initiative was going to be difficult to control.

Voter Turnout

One of the key claims of pundits concerning the use of direct democracy is that their mere appearance on a ballot increases voter turnout. To understand this claim more clearly, one needs to understand the long history of research on the causes of increases and decreases in voter turnout. Simply put, voter turnout in the United States

is one of the lowest of any industrialized country in the world (Lijphart 1997). Presidential election turnout has plateaued around the 58 percent mark, and participation in mid-term elections is embarrassingly low for an industrialized nation and only getting lower. For example, the 2014 mid-term elections saw one of the lowest voter turnout rates in United States history. Only thirty-seven percent of the electorate turned out to vote, with Indiana leading the way at a paltry twenty-eight percent.

To better understand the problems associated with getting citizens to turn out to vote, it would be helpful to better understand who turns out to vote and why. The best place to start is the seminal work on the cost-benefit analysis of voting by (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). To determine whether one will vote, a citizen examines the cost associated with participating in the election. There will be costs associated with the time it takes to register; become informed on the issues being discussed; and then determine which candidate positions aligns most closely with their own. The rational voter then makes a decision as to whether or not the time and effort it takes to become informed on the issues and then actually go out and cast a ballot is less than the perceived utility they will gain after they vote. The model proceeds as such: P is the probability that a voter will affect the outcome of the election. B is a measure of whether or not a particular candidate will produce a greater benefit to their desired outcome. D is measured as the sense of personal gratification the voter gets from participating in the election – described by Riker and Ordeshook as the voter fulfilling their civic duty. C would be the cost(s) associated with voting. The authors declare that it is rational for a citizen to vote if the model appears as such: $PB + D > C$ (Riker

and Ordeshook 1968). This means the citizen has taken into account all of the associated costs with turning out to vote and decided the perceived benefits are greater than the cost(s).

Thus, using the rational voter model, low voter turnout would be an indication that either citizens are experiencing high costs associated with participation, or low expected benefits. These benefits can take several different forms: some are monetary (voting your pocketbook); fulfilling your civic duty by participating in the democracy; or personal gratification related to deep personal beliefs and faiths. Because of this, there is no easy way to measure or quantify the "D" term in the rational voter model. For instance, a candidate might be campaigning on a platform of strong economic reform and strengthening the safety net for the poor, but is also interested in maintaining legal abortions and extending marriage rights to LGBTQ couples. A poverty-stricken voter might eschew the thought of promises of an increase in benefits that might directly impact their economic situation to vote for a candidate voting more in line with their stance on moral issues. This particular voter might feel a larger sense of gratification by voting strictly based on their moral beliefs, believing their vote will have a bigger impact on this issue. Rather than voting on a person that may or may not come through on promises, you can directly vote on the issue.

Other theories on voter turnout examine demographic changes as the principal cause of decreased turnout (Teixeira 1987). While it might be tempting to point to the nation's perceived lack of faith in the government following the turbulent 1968-1972 timeframe, Teixeira points out that this drop in participation coincided with several factors during that timeframe. The adoption of the 26th Amendment in 1969 lowered the

legal voting age from twenty-one to eighteen, adding millions of young people into the voting pool all at once; and as the author points out, younger voters are much less likely to turn out than their elder counterparts (Teixeira 1987).

McDonald and Popkin (2001) have argued that America's problem with getting people to the polls is based on how political scientists actually measure voter turnout. They conclude that the number of people coming out to vote is not declining, just the number of people we are including in the voting rolls. The authors point out that the denominator political scientists had been using for the number of voters included many individuals who are ineligible to vote. Members of the population over the age of 18 but ineligible to vote, such as convicted felons and non-citizens were being included in these numbers and skewing the percentage of non-voters (McDonald and Popkin 2001). This led the authors to develop VAP (Voting-age Population) versus VEP (Voting-eligible Population) as a measurement in voter turnout. VEP is a more accurate representation of the percentage of American citizens that turn out to vote in any given election, as it takes into account those eighteen or older but legally restricted from voting for various reasons. However, even when using VEP as our denominator for voter turnout, we still see a low percentage of voters relative to other industrialized countries.

Some scholars disagree that America's political participation is simply a matter of voter turnout measurement, and claim the level of civic participation as a whole is a dangerous problem in America that needs to be addressed. Putnam (1995) cites a lack of "social capital" – features of our everyday social lives that allow us to act together to achieve common goals - as the chief culprit for a decline in voter turnout. Putnam sees

social capital as being closely related to political participation, and as people become more disconnected from one another, they become less concerned with achieving common civic goals for the greater good. Putnam concedes that interest in politics over the last few decades has remained stable or even grown, but in name only – not in participation. Becoming an active member of a political party by attending meetings, going door to door to help campaign, or helping your neighbors get registered to vote has been replaced by sending checks to your candidate's super PAC or signing an online petition (Putnam 1995). As Putnam sees it, being involved with these aspects of civic society in name only does not create the same kind of connectedness people once felt to their communities, leaving them to feel less engaged with the process as a whole. It only stands to reason that as citizens become less engaged they become less likely to take the time out of their days to vote in an election.

Regardless of the measurement used, it is clear that voter turnout in American politics remains low when compared to other industrialized nation. Scholars continue to argue about the exact reason for the low turnout in America, but the most likely explanation seems to simply be voter apathy; a lack of interest in America's frequent elections. It seems possible that direct democracy could play a large role in getting the electorate engaged in voting, as they are able to determine directly the outcome of a policy in question.

Who Votes and Why?

Several individual factors have been isolated as key determinants of whether or not an individual is likely to vote in an election. Age is a strong indicator of political

involvement, more specifically; the older an individual is the more likely they are to vote. According to a study of mid-term elections by the U.S. Census Bureau, voting rates for the 1978-2014 elections show a strong correlation between age and voter turnout. For example, in the 2014 election there was a clear uptick in voter turnout rates with increases in each age group. In the 2014 election, 23.1 percent of individuals 18-34 showed up to vote in that election, while nearly 60 percent of those 65 years or older participated (File 2015). Other factors in the study found to be statistically significant were race - with non-Hispanic whites found to be the most likely demographic to vote. Level of income was also a strong indicator of voter participation, as increases in household income correlated to increased voter participation (Franklin 1996; File 2015). Additionally, the study also found that married individuals were more likely to vote as well as those residing in the Midwest and the South (File 2015).

There are several other factors to identify as key determinants of electoral participation, but two have particular interest to this study: religiousness/church participation, and political efficacy. Scholars have concluded that those individuals most likely to identify as strongly religious, or engaging in higher levels of religious participation and church attendance, are far more prospective to vote than those who do not (Djupe and Grant 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2006). The authors conclude, similarly to Robert Putnam, that religious institutions, particularly churches, serve as a sort of training ground for developing civic participation skills, network building, and participation in group membership both sanctioned and unsanctioned by the church. Many of these church groups encourage and recruit members of the congregation to

participate in the political process – where they are likely to gain their political knowledge about issues and candidates through other church members (Djupe and Grant 2001; Djupe and Gilbert 2006).

Karp and Banducci (2008) point out that an individual's confidence in their own ability to understand the political system, or political efficacy, strongly increases the likelihood an individual will turn out to vote. It is important to note that the authors do not claim that actual knowledge of the political system, candidates, or issues are what make a person more likely to vote; it is their own personal belief that they understand those factors and have the ability to influence them. This line of research is of particular interest to this study, as both forms of political efficacy would seem to be present when an individual is participating in a direct democracy election.

To summarize, the demographic picture of the average voter is an elderly, white non-Hispanic, living in the South or Midwest, married, and middle-class or above, confident in their political knowledge, and regularly involved in a church. With those factors in mind, it would be helpful to examine how the introduction of a ballot initiative, specifically one focusing on marriage equality or LGBTQ rights, can increase voter participation in America in that particular group.

Donovan, Tolbert, Parry (2005) concluded that churches played a key role in mobilizing Ohio voters to the candidacy of George W. Bush in 2004. Bush's claim was that representing true Christian values by advocating for the passage of Ohio's same-sex marriage ban during his campaign. Church members in Ohio that were already more likely to be involved in the political process and turn out to vote were thought to

be even more motivated by the inclusion of a same-sex marriage ban on the ballot. The other key factor of voter turnout in this study, political efficacy, also seemed to be present. This is especially true in the context of ballot initiatives concerning same-sex marriage. Political efficacy is felt by the voter when they determine they have a firm understanding of the policies in question. Same-sex marriage ballot initiatives were usually very short and easy to understand. Unlike many ballot initiatives that contained long convoluted paragraphs or even pages, most ballot initiatives concerning same-sex marriage were simply a paragraph long, and in some cases, only a sentence or two. Here is one example of how a ballot initiative concerning same-sex marriage appeared to voters in the state of Tennessee during the 2006 election:

Proposes an amendment to Article XI of the Constitution of the State of Tennessee to define marriage as a contract between one man and one woman.

The clarity and simplicity in the language being used for this proposal requires very little political knowledge or expertise to understand what is being discussed; indeed, a voter seeing this on the ballot would have likely felt a great deal of internal political efficacy. Furthermore, as prior research on ballot initiatives has shown us, voters feel a great deal of external efficacy when using the initiative, as there is a very clear mechanism at work with regard to how a proposal on the ballot will affect policy (Karp and Banducci 2008). It can be best summarized as such: if you disagree with legalizing same-sex marriage, and you vote for this, it will be banned. This likely means a voter will feel like external efficacy is very pronounced when using the initiative.

Age, as another clear indicator of voter participation, would clearly play a factor with regard to interest in a ballot initiative concerning LGBTQ rights and redefining the definition of marriage. There are strong indications that the elderly are more socially conservative (File 2015) and such a drastic change to social norms would likely offer strong motivation to participate in the election. By examining several of these factors through the lens of the inclusion of a same-sex marriage ballot initiative, it now seems intuitive that several factors political scientists have identified as important to increasing turnout would be in place in a direct democracy election; particularly when there is an initiative concerning same-sex marriage.

Direct Democracy and Public Policy

One of the most important questions regarding the use of direct democracy is just how responsive direct democracy is to the preferences of its citizens compared to states that do not allow the initiative. Regarding fiscal policy, Camobreco (1998) examined research that direct democracy is a more responsive method for translating a citizen's preference into actual policy than through the legislative process. Refuting the work of Gerber (1996), Camobreco found that not only does the initiative process not strengthen the link between the electorate's preferences and fiscal policy; it may actually weaken the link. Camobreco's method for testing this link was a telephone public opinion survey that asked respondent's liberalism and then state's with higher scores were coded as such. The results of this survey were open to the respondent's interpretation of their score on the ideological scale, and it seems perfectly reasonable to assume some respondents that are socially liberal but fiscally conservative could still

consider themselves liberal, which would alter the results. Bowler and Donovan (2004) would later refute this contention by proving that it is the way the initiative process is coded in the model that is changing the outcome. In their words:

> *(Modeling the initiative process as a dummy variable) …also makes a false distinction between states that do not have the initiative and those that have it in on the books but rarely use it in practice. As a result, modeling the impact of direct democracy with such a dummy variable reduces the precision of our estimates and probably increases the risk of Type II error, drawing the conclusion that the initiative has no impact on politics when it does (358).*

The authors also point out that the initiative makes maximum impact in those states where it is easier to get on the ballot, thus bypassing state legislature. In this regard, the initiative can also have an indirect impact by holding legislators accountable simply by the threat of it being used (Bowler and Donovan 2004). Legislators feel more compelled to be in tune with the will of electorate and try to pass legislation accordingly, as the electorate has the option to simply bypass legislators in the initiative process. This would seemingly make the legislators not responsive to the electorate's will more likely to lose reelection.

Earlier research on direct democracy and public policy has also examined how well minority rights are protected in a direct democracy election. Scholars were split between those that believed minority rights suffered when the majority was able to directly determine policy (Gamble 1997) and those that believed minority rights were not affected (Frey and Goette 1998; Donovan and Bowler 1998). Haider-Markel et. al (2007) examined this line of research and focused exclusively on LGBTQ rights. The

authors found that anti-LGBTQ measures were more likely to pass than those considered pro-LGBTQ (2007). Most importantly, the authors found that 90 percent of the initiatives in their model covered basic human rights for the LGTBQ community, not peripheral issues like marriage equality (Haider-Markel, Querze and Lindaman 2007). Lewis (2011) further researched the question of minority rights and representation, to determine whether minority rights are more or less protected in direct democracy. Lewis found that anti-minority proposals are more likely to pass in direct democracy states. Pure democratic systems in which the majority directly engages in policymaking, there is no check on the power of the majority to rule at the expense of the minorities. This is why James Madison advocated for representative democracy as opposed to direct democracy. As Madison saw it, representative democracy provided a filtering system for ideas that would limit the majority's ability to oppress the minority and better protect the rights of the minority. As stated by Lewis:

> *Minority concerns can be voiced during policy deliberations through their elected representatives. Furthermore, to gain passage, bills must gain a rather large consensus to be repeatedly approved at each stage of the legislative process. To build this necessary consensus, policy proposals need to attract a wide range of support. Compromise and moderation are essential tools to build consensus around a successful policy proposal. Furthermore, the legislative process places a premium on building relationships. Legislative decision-making is not a one-shot game. Rather, legislators work with each other again and again across a myriad of issues and policies. Therefore, it would be ill advised for legislators to shut out their minority group colleagues on one issue since they may be needed for consensus on another issue. (Lewis 2011, 200)*

Direct democracy gives majority groups the ability to bypass this system of compromise with the groups in the minority completely. An initiative is generally a

one-time issue appearing on the ballot for a voter who is unlikely to consider the long-term ramifications of the policy being enacted or repealed. Lewis claims that Madison's fears of direct democracy's ability to oppress the minority is being realized, as anti-minority proposals are more likely to be passed in states with direct democracy (Lewis 2011).

Impact of Direct Democracy on Voter Turnout

Recent studies on the effect that ballot initiatives have on voter turnout have generally agreed that turnout has increased, but that has not always been the case (Biggers 2011). One of the earliest studies that tackled the question of voter turnout with regard to the initiative process was the seminal work of Tolbert et al. (2001b). In it, the authors examined competing research that claimed any link between voter turnout and the initiative process was inconclusive, or had no effect at all. Examining an era of declining voter turnout, 1970-1996, the authors studied all 50 states and determined that the ones that used the initiative process saw an increase in voter turnout in both the presidential and off year election (Tolbert et al. 2001b). This research seemed to finally put the debate about the initiative process's effect on voter turnout to rest, but scholars are still not in agreement as to the exact mechanism at play that increases turnout.

Dyck (2010) argues that states that allows the initiative can provide a long-term educative effect on voters. Being able to participate in the meaningful elections created by direct democracy ballot initiatives have created more engaged and active citizens. The authors find that there is a short-term affect derived from direct democracy (voter

turnout) and a long-term affect from direct democracy (increased political knowledge. However, the increase in voter turnout is found to occur mostly in partisan voters, not those on the periphery. The authors find that these results occur primarily in high salient, high-spending campaigns that attract increased media coverage and interest among the public (Dyck 2010). The educative affects are found to be long lasting, as citizens in states that allow the ballot initiative become more politically engaged and savvy over repeated exposure to the process.

Some scholars have concluded that the uptick in participation is dependent upon what particular issue is being put on the ballot, specifically if it involves an initiative that is morality-oriented (Grummel 2008; Biggers 2011; Garretson 2014; Biggers 2014). As we have seen earlier, the cost of obtaining information on a subject or candidate and political efficacy are two strong indicators of voter turnout. It should come as no surprise that initiatives dealing with complex or esoteric issues, such as school redistricting, bond measures, and natural resources, seem less likely to encourage voter turnout than those with low costs that elicit strong emotional responses – like same-sex marriage (Biggers 2011). Biggers (2014) further researches the effects of ballot initiatives on voter turnout and challenges the notion that direct democracy increases political engaged and interest in voting. He asserts that the mechanisms that drive an individual to the ballot in a direct democracy are limited to ballot initiatives that deal specifically with morality-based policies. With issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and same-sex marriage being so closely tied to religious beliefs, it should come as no surprise that voters tend to be more interested in voting, campaigning, or

helping others register to vote when there is an issue dealing with one of these morality-driven issues.

As stated above, Grummel (2008) notes that ballot issues dealing with moral issues are more likely to increase turnout because of the level of media coverage these issues command. This increase in attention from the media lowers the cost of obtaining information for voters and drums up interest in the electorate. Childers and Binder (2012) pursue this claim that media attention is the driving force behind increased participation in a direct democracy election. The assertion is that the level of campaign intensity associated with direct democracy that is the defining factor in increasing voter turnout. This argument states that the voter information costs are lowered by the constant media coverage of the issues in question, therefore, making it easier for the average voter who might otherwise be uninformed to more easily make a decision and become active in the election process. However, there is still a cost-benefit analysis taking place in the voter's mind and they must actively seek some form of information on the issue(s) at hand on the ballot. Childers and Binder provide insight into the lower cost of the information due to the media and campaign attention, and indeed provide us a large piece of the puzzle with regard to voter turnout in a direct democracy election. Seabrook et. al (2015) study this notion and refute the findings of Childers and Binder. The authors examine the concept that ballot initiatives raise Americans' political knowledge through the influx of low-cost information provided during a direct democracy campaign. The authors conclude that this easily accessible information tends to overwhelm voters with choices and lessens the motivation to participate in a direct democracy election. The authors used a wide variety of individual level testing

methods to determine the affect these campaigns have on voters and found that ballot initiatives did not increase a voter's general political knowledge on the subjects being discussed and actually depressed turnout (Seabrook et. al 2015).

Donovan et al. (2008) delve into individual level voting behavior to determine whether the onslaught of initiatives banning same-sex marriage in 2004 directly benefited Republican candidates, particularly George W. Bush. The authors theorize that the Republican Party was able to do this by using issue priming to affect voter's underlying attitudes about same-sex marriage. According to the authors, the focus on same-sex marriage by George W. Bush and his campaign increased the salience of the issue in the minds of voters when they were evaluating presidential candidates in the 2004 election. It had particular effect on the voters that had little interest in the election prior to these issues becoming a central part of Bush's campaign (Donovan et al. 2008). Garretson (2014) finds that while Donovan et al. were correct in their interpretation of same-sex marriage's effect on the 2004 election, the pendulum swung the other direction in the 2012 presidential election. Engaging in an individual level study of voter behavior in the 2012 election, the author finds that proponents of marriage equality have become more engaged in fighting on behalf of the issue at the polls and their level of enthusiasm has eclipsed that of socially conservative Republicans in the most recent presidential election (Garretson 2014).

Previous research on voter turnout tells us the story of which voters are more likely to come out to vote, as well as some of the circumstances that make it more likely for them to be engaged in an election. Prior research on morality-based initiatives tells us certain types of ballot initiatives make it more likely that a citizen

will feel compelled to turn out to vote, but it does not tell us enough about which specific initiatives and which elections make the difference. It now becomes crucial to engage in new research that examines the complex issue of morality-based voting initiatives to offer up new insights on macro-level voting behavior in states giving citizens the power of the initiative. Previous research has concluded that direct democracy initiatives do indeed increase voter turnout, but do not always agree on all of the mechanisms at play. This research seeks to isolate the direct democracy issue(s) that compel citizens to turn out to vote in a given election, and why they are taking the time to vote for or against this issue.

To study these topics, I will test the following hypotheses:

> *H1- In a comparison of voter turnout across states; the states with more direct democracy initiatives on the ballot will see an increase in voter turnout.*
>
> *H2- In a comparison of voter turnout across states; those states with an initiative concerning same-sex marriage will have higher voter turnout than those without direct democracy initiatives.*
>
> *H3 – In a comparison of voter turnout across states; those states with a ballot initiative concerning increases in the minimum wage will see an increase in voter turnout during the election.*

Chapter 3

Data, Method, and Results

The dependent variable of interest in this study is a measurement of voter turnout using data collected from McDonald's (2001) national election project. McDonald's method of measurement, Voting Eligible Population (VEP) is a percentage of individuals in each state that voted for the highest office in each election year. Previously, scholars had used a much more simplistic formula for measuring voter turnout that essentially took the number of voters that participated in an election and dividing it by the number of individuals the Census Bureau estimated to be eighteen years or older (McDonald and Popkin 2001). This gave scholars a good idea of the percentage of voters participating in an election for each state, but it still left out many factors to include in voting measurements. Researchers have argued that starting in the 1960s; the turnout rate for national elections began trending downward (McDonald and Popkin 2001). McDonald was able to show that voters were not disappearing from the rolls as some scholars had suggested, but instead researchers were using an antiquated method to measure turnout: voting-age population (VAP). The VAP includes people who are ineligible to vote; for example, noncitizens, felons, the mentally incompetent, etc. (McDonald and Popkin 2001). Simply put, the number of Americans that were incarcerated or immigrating here without full citizenship began to increase steadily and researchers were still including them in voting rolls as though they were still eligible to vote. As McDonald puts it: "we calculate an accurate estimate of the voting-eligible population (VEP) from the VAP and show that, since 1972, the ineligible population is growing faster than the eligible population, which gives rise to the perception that voter

participation is decreasing (McDonald 2001). Thus, my dependent variable is VEP for each state for each of the included years.

Using the National Conference of State Legislatures database (NCSL), I pulled the total number of initiatives for each state and for each year from 1998-2014 and recorded the total number of direct democracy ballot initiatives that appeared on that state's ballot during that particular election year. This was done to test the hypothesis that the mere presence of any initiative would increase voter turnout, and if so, the more initiatives appearing on a particular state ballot the more likely those citizens were to vote. The number of initiatives that appear on a ballot vary wildly from state to state, as many of the states that allow direct democracy hardly ever vote directly on an issue; for example, from 1998-2014, citizens in Connecticut voted on a total of four ballot initiatives from all aspects of the political spectrum, not just same-sex marriage or minimum wage. In 2000 alone, citizens in the state of Oregon considered thirty-two ballot initiatives in total.

Then, to test the remaining two hypotheses that highly salient issues increase voter turnout, all initiatives and ballot referenda dealing with the topics of same-sex marriage and minimum wage in that timeframe were catalogued and measured. This created two dummy variables. The first is coded 1 if the state had a same-sex marriage initiative that year and 0 otherwise. The second is coded 1 if the state had an initiative on the minimum wage that year and 0 otherwise. Public discussion on same-sex marriage and LGBTQ protections began in 1993, when the Hawaiian Supreme Court ruled that laws denying same-sex couples equal marriage opportunities violated the state's equal protection rights and were in essence a form of discrimination. The

Hawaiian Supreme Court decision seemingly opened the possibility that states would begin recognizing same-sex marriage as a legal union on equal grounds with opposite-sex marriage. Conservatives responded with a flurry of ballot initiatives in the upcoming elections prohibiting the legality of same-sex marriage and rolling back protections for the LGBTQ population (Underhill 2015). The data set for this study was chosen to start in 1998 because same-sex marriage initiates started appearing in elections with increased frequency starting in that year as conservative opposition began to organize. In 1998 alone, seven ballot initiatives appeared across the country, two directly outlawing same-sex marriages and five concerning protections for the LGBTQ community when prior to 1998 same-sex marriage was essentially a non-issue. The floodgates soon opened, as by the end of 2000, forty states had constitutional provisions limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples.

To examine the above hypotheses, I ran three different linear regression models: total ballot initiatives count; same-sex marriage initiatives; and minimum wage initiatives. The first, total initiatives, is a simple count of how many initiatives appeared on the election ballot for each state for every election year from 1998-2014. As stated above, the years of the study were chosen because of this study's specific interest in ballot initiatives concerning minimum wage increases or restrictions on same-sex marriage. The topic of same-sex marriage began to show up with more frequency during this timeframe. Total initiatives were included in the model to determine whether or not there were specific kinds of initiatives that increased turnout, or direct democracy itself increases turnout in an election. The second model, same-sex marriage, uses a dummy variable that measures whether or not a ballot initiative

appeared in a particular state during an election cycle. For the purposes of this study, whether or not the initiative passed or failed was not included in the regression model. This study is primarily concerned with whether or not the mere appearance of a highly salient issue moral issue like same-sex marriage could increase the voter turnout during an election, as claimed by pundits during the 2004 presidential election. These initiatives were included in the model to test the claims of political pundits that it was specifically the same-sex marriage ballot initiatives in 2004 that increased voter turnout for George W. Bush and helped him win reelection. The last linear regression model run, minimum wage, uses a dummy variable that measures whether or not a ballot initiative concerning the increase of the minimum wage appeared on a ballot during the election. Just as the Republican Party runs their campaigns with opposition to marriage equality as a part of the party platform, an increase to the minimum wage has been on the Democratic Party's platform for several decades now. This was included in the study to measure whether or not the inclusion of these initiatives increased turnout, giving credence to the claims that issues important to each party could draw a statistically significant turnout increase of their particular constituency.

There are many other potential causes of variance in voter turnout that have been documented in the long history of this type of research. Therefore, it is important to control for as many of these potentially confounding variables as possible. The first control variable included in this model, senator election, is a dummy variable that measures whether or not a senate election took place in that particular state during that election cycle. Similar measurements were created for the other election cycle dummy variables, governor election and presidential year election. In an effort to control for

these three high level elections, each election for these three offices were categorized for each year from 1998-2014 and coded 1 for the presence of an election, and 0 otherwise. This model also includes several pieces of demographic information for each state, to use as control variables. Data were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau's reports on each state's race, gender percentage, race breakdown, education level, and per capita income. To control for economic conditions affecting turnout, state and national unemployment rates were collected from the Bureau of Labor Statistics from 1998-2014. To control for each state's potential polarization as a driving force behind increased turnout, data were collected from Shor/McCarty 2014 study for Ideological Mapping of American Legislatures from the Harvard Dataverse website. To further explain my models, I present Table 1 below, which breaks down all summary statistics.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Continuous Variables				
Per Capita Income	2.409	0.520	1.59	4.53
Bachelor Degree	0.260	0.057	0.139	0.524
High School Only	1.238	5.971	0.729	92.4
Categorical Variables				
	Percentage			
Male	0.492	0.008	0.47	0.52
Female	0.507	0.008	0.48	0.53
White	0.723	0.162	0.229	0.965

Black	0.115	0.113	0.005	0.613
Hispanic	0.093	0.094	0.007	0.473
Two Races Plus	0.025	0.029	0.007	0.231
High School Graduate	1.238	5.971	0.729	92.4
Bachelor Plus	0.260	0.057	0.139	0.524
Democratic Presidential Vote Percentage	0.479	0.109	0.246	0.924

Results

Table 2 below presents my results after estimating three regression models designed to test my three hypotheses.

Table 2: Initiative Effects of Voter Eligible Population (VEP)

VEP Wage	Predicting VEP Total Initiatives	Predicting VEP Same-Sex Marriage Initiatives	Predicting Minimum Initiatives
Count Total Indicatives	0.0031** (0.0012)		
Same-Sex marriage		0.048* (0.017)	
Min. Wage			0.015* (0.119)
Presidential Year	0.2047 (0.0077)	0.192 (0.007)	0.193 (0.007)
Presidential Year X Total Initiatives	-0.0035 (0.0009)		
Pres. Year X Same-sex Marriage		-0.032 (0.019)	

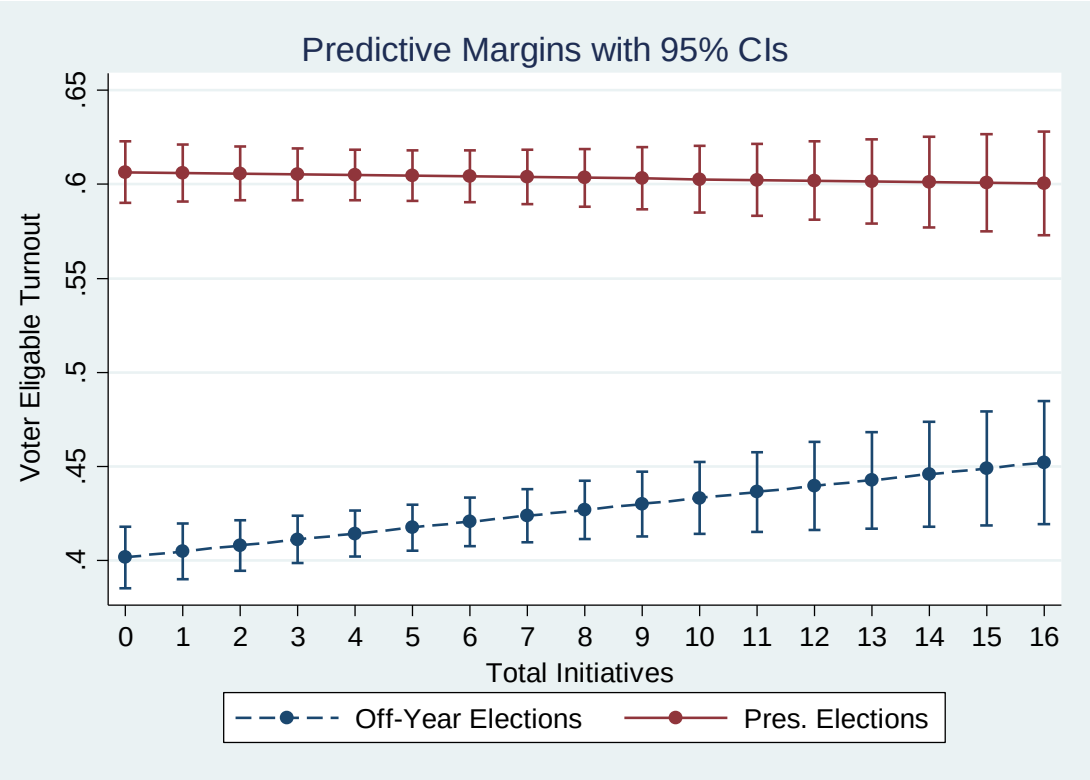
Pres. Year X Min. Wage			.005**
			(0.043)
Control Variables			
Male	2.969	3.030	3.106
	(0.832)	(0.789)	(0.786)
Senate Elect	0.012*	0.013*	0.012*
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Governor Elect	0.100	0.007**	0.269
	(0.006)	(0.126)	(0.140)
Per Capita Income	-0.275	-0.031	-0.034
	(0.174)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Bachelor Degree	0.474	0.497	0.514
	(0.237)	(0.238)	(0.239)
White	0.272	0.264	0.261
	(0.372)	(0.040)	(0.040)
Democratic State	0.228	0.226	0.225
Pres Election Percent	(0.890)	(0.090)	(0.092)
State Unemployment	0.004**	0.004**	0.004**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
N	459	459	459

Notes: Ordinary least squares models were estimated in all three cases. Robust standard errors in parentheses.
* = p < .05, ** =p< .01, *** = p < .001

My first hypothesis tested was H-1, which stated, *"In a comparison of voter turnout across states; the states with more direct democracy initiatives on the ballot will see an increase in voter turnout."* In order to test this hypothesis, I used the Total Initiatives model found in Table 2. This was a total count of all initiatives on all ballots in each state across the nation from 1998-2014. To understand the model and how the initiatives affected turnout, you must first look at the interaction between presidential year election and ballot initiative count. The model shows statistical significance when presidential year equals zero – indicating an off-year election. As expected, Hypothesis 1 is supported by the findings of the model. Voter turnout was indeed increased with the presence of a ballot initiative in a non-presidential year election. Variables such as

"white only," "male," and "senate election," were also statistically significant, which coincides with previous lines of research concerning voting behavior - as one would expect, giving further validity to the model (File 2015). Because summary statistics themselves can be difficult to interpret, I will further present the substantive meaning of these results below in Figure 3. As the graph in Figure 3 shows, the total number of initiatives for each state used in the model ranged from 0-16; if one state moves from the 25th quartile to the 75th, it could increase turnout by four percent in an off-year election.

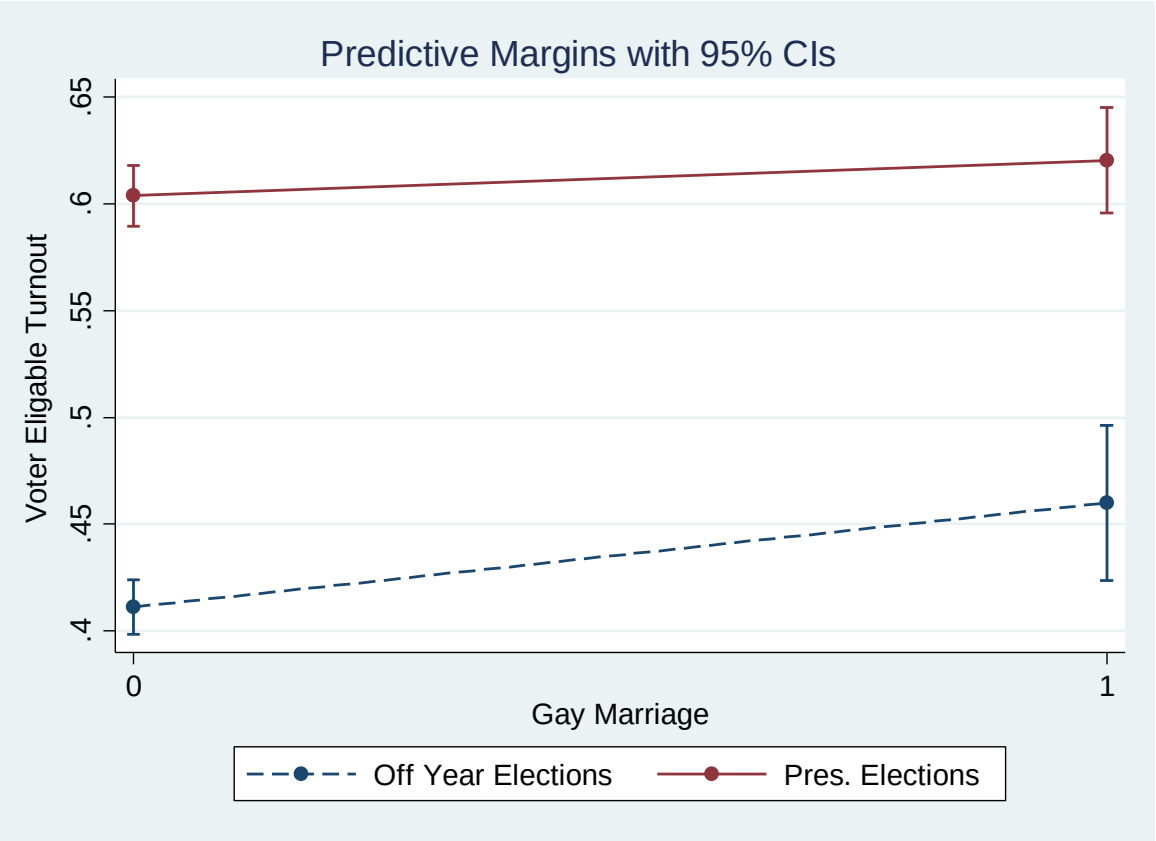
Figure 3: All Initiatives Graph



My second hypothesis tested, H-2, which stated *"In a comparison of voter turnout across states; those states with an initiative concerning same-sex marriage will*

have higher voter turnout than those without direct democracy initiatives," was tested by the same-sex marriage linear regression model in Table 2. The Independent Variable, same-sex marriage initiatives, is a simple dummy variable that indicated whether a same-sex marriage initiative appeared on the ballot at all. Looking at the same-sex marriage model in Table 2, we see statistical significance in all variables that we would expect to see, such as "white," "male," "bachelor degree or higher," and "senate election year," giving further credence to the model's validity. There is strong evidence that ballot initiatives and more specifically, same-sex ballot initiatives, increase voter turnout in an off-year election. Looking at Table 2, we see statistical significance in the same-sex marriage model when presidential year equals zero – indicating an off-year election. To show the strength the significance, Figure 4 is presented below. As shown in the graph, you can clearly see a five percent increase in the Dependent Variable, Voter Eligible Turnout, in states having any same-sex marriage initiative on the ballot in off-year, or non-presidential year election.

Figure 4: Same-Sex Marriage Graph



To further explore whether or not is was specifically same-sex marriage initiatives that increased voter turnout, or other very highly salient issues at the forefront of the news, minimum wage ballot initiatives were also tested. The final hypothesis tested, H-3, stated, "*In a comparison of voter turnout across states; those states with a ballot initiatives concerning increases in the minimum wage will see an increase in voter turnout during the election.*" In order to test this hypothesis I used the Minimum Wage regression model found in Table 2. As you can see in the model, the variable "minimum wage" failed to reach statistical significance in an off-year election but reached significance during presidential year elections. Table 2 below shows the interaction in the model between presidential year and minimum wage ballot initiatives

and reaches statistical significance, but not in the absence of interaction – meaning an off-year election. As we are unable to isolate that the independent variable alone is affecting turnout, we must reject Hypothesis 3. An increase to the minimum wage is indeed a hot-button topic for many around the nation, as evidenced by the attention paid to it on both sides of the aisle during the most recent presidential campaign season; however, the total number of initiatives concerning this topic was likely not enough to show any meaningful interaction in the model. The lack of total initiatives concerning the topic of a minimum wage increase could also mean this particular issue is not as highly salient as one would think even given the increase in recent news coverage. Looking further into the model, we see voter turnout increase with the usual list of variables: "increase in per capita income, increase in education, and male." This is exactly as we would expect and gives further validity to the model. According to my data, this topic was only voted on fourteen times from 1998-2014. If we see this hot-button topic make its way onto more direct democracy ballots, this variable should be re-tested to determine statistical significance.

Conclusion and Discussion

This project started with the purpose of examining macro-level voting behavior in states using direct democracy ballot initiatives. This research was motivated by assertions of some political pundits and politicians that ballot initiatives – more specifically same-sex marriage ballot initiatives – can increase voter turnout in an election and benefit or harm one party or candidate as a result. More specifically, that same-sex ballot initiatives played such a major role in re-electing George W. Bush in

the 2004 presidential election. Due to the high stakes of the research involved (the Presidency) it becomes imperative that we as researchers are engaging in sound science to scrutinize these claims. The overall purpose of this thesis has been to examine voter turnout in states with same-sex ballot initiatives over several elections using the most up to date voting data available, as well as using voter eligible population (VEP) to calculate changes in voter turnout.

With respect to statistical evidence, I collected data on the total number of initiatives in each state for each election from 1998-2014, as well as all initiatives concerning same-sex marriage or LGBTQ rights from 1998-2014; I then collected all demographic, financial, and educational information for each state, and voter turnout levels for all elections from 1998-2014. Using the more accurate voter eligible turnout as my measure of voter turnout in my regression model, I tested all three of my hypotheses. The first hypothesis tested whether or not the total number of initiatives in a state increased the voter turnout. If this were true, the model would have shown that as the number of initiatives on a ballot increased, voter turnout should increase as well. The results show statistical significance in an off-year election. Off-year elections generally draw a lower voter turnout than presidential year elections, and ballot initiatives may have given citizens a reason to be more involved in the off-year elections.

The second hypothesis tested whether the appearance of ballot initiatives concerning same-sex marriage increased voter turnout. The claim that same-sex marriage ballot initiatives can increase voter turnout and possibly sway an election was tested for validity and found to have some credence, only not as predicted by pundits.

Constitutional amendments banning same-sex marriage were thought to attract conservative voters to the polls like moths to a flame in the 2004 presidential election, tipping the results in favor of George W. Bush. However, the results showed a roughly five percent in voter turnout in off-year elections, not presidential elections. The pundits and politicians that claimed same-sex marriage initiatives helped decide the 2004 presidential election were wrong according to the results presented here.

The third hypothesis tested whether ballot initiatives concerning minimum wage could have increased voter turnout in the elections from 1998-2014. The results showed no statistical significance. This study was not able to find any statistically significant relationship between voter turnout and minimum wage initiatives, but this could be due to the fact that were so few observations in the model. The entire time period studied, 1998-2014, only saw fourteen ballot initiatives concerning minimum wage on the ballots. Recently, two of America's most populous states, New York and California, have agreed to move the minimum wage in their states from $7.25 an hour to $15 starting in the years 2019 and 2022. As this issue gains more salience, we might see a push from other states to follow that lead and put this issue on the ballot in future elections. If this were to occur, adding these instances to the data set would allow us to re-test the model and see a similar effect as same-sex marriage.

The limitations of this particular study mean individual level voting behavior was not taken into account to determine whether the ballot initiatives brought individuals out to vote or the campaign intensity surrounding the measures brought them out. A study on individual level voting behavior during direct democracy elections could help determine whether voters coming to the polls were supporting or

opposed to the measures in question. There was indeed an increase in voter turnout during off-year elections that can be tied to same-sex marriage, but the limitations of the study do not allow us to say whether people were coming out to support the measure or specifically to oppose it. Research by Donovan et al. (2008) focused solely on individual voting behavior and found that the 2004 election saw an increase in the level of voting interest in social conservatives in the 2004 election just as Garretson (2014) found that socially liberal voters were more interested in the 2012 campaign. However, this does not completely capture actual voter turnout, only a respondent's level of enthusiasm for voting in those particular elections and their political affiliations.

In a more practical sense, what does this line of research mean for policy makers? Simply put, ballot initiatives during non-presidential year elections may be a way to increase voter turnout in states that are struggling with low turnout. As shown by the solid red line in Figure 2, ballot initiatives and the total number of ballot initiatives just do not matter during a presidential year election - the effect is not pronounced enough to claim any statistical significance. However, looking at off-year elections, we do see an increase of nearly five percent, which in the context of a mid-term election would be a massive change. As stated above, the 2014 mid-term elections were historically low for an industrialized country. In the state of Indiana, which does not allow direct democracy ballot initiatives, the turnout was merely twenty-eight percent of the voting eligible population. An increase of five percent during the 2014 election in Indiana would be an increase of roughly sixty-seven thousand voters. Democracies thrive as participation in the political process increases,

and this can be one solution to increasing this participation and keeping the citizenry engaged.

In conclusion, while ballot initiatives may not have a significant impact on a presidential contest, this research provides evidence that it may play a significant role in determining the outcome in non-presidential year elections. As the public becomes more accepting of same-sex marriage and it becomes a less salient issue for the electorate, other ballot initiatives that elicit a strong emotional response could be used to the same affect. A highly salient ballot initiative could still possibly be used in mid-term elections to increase voter turnout on either side of the political aisle.

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